

Of Micaceous Clay, Pottery and the Alexander Technique.

by Mary Diggin

I have just completed a weekend with Robyn Avalon and Felipe Ortega, working with micaceous clay and the Alexander technique. Felipe is a potter of Jicarilla Apache descent and Robyn, who many of you may know through her involvement with the animalwork and the IIVR, is an Alexander Teacher, who likes to teach the technique in the context of activity. This weekend she worked with us as we made pots.

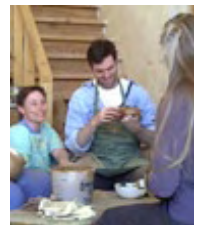
The first encounter with the clay was a sensory experience. The gentle-almost-dank-wet-earth-scent, the softness and warmth of the clay, the light earth colour, so different from the darker red clays I had occasionally worked with before or the natural dark grey clay I dug as a child from the beach on Kilkee strand. It was a clay that invited touching, shaping, emerging.

And so, on Friday, we began. Felipe leads us in ceremony with cornmeal and prayer to the Four Directions. A bean pot is our project. Micaceous clay pots are stove and oven proof once fired, the mica in the clay helping distribute heat evenly throughout, and beans from such a pot taste more delicious than beans cooked in any other way. Felipe had shown us how to work the clay into the shape of a pot, forming first the flat tortilla shape, scraping, adding coils, shaping and scraping until a bean pot formed and emerged beneath his skillful hands. It seemed simple as do all crafts when you watch a master.

Yet, this is part of the beauty of working with this clay. The pots form, beneath your hands, even amateur hands. They dry, they wrinkle, crease, crack perhaps and they can be repaired. This clay is the only clay that can be repaired. This is the only clay that mimics life Felipe says. Felipe appears by my side, 'watch what I do, watch what you do', he repeats, teaching by example. Coils are coiled and placed. Sides are sealed with the rectangular edges of tools. Insides are shaped with the curved. 'All beauty comes from the inside', Felipe adds, as the pots take shape.

The pots are left to dry a little, once the bowl had formed before building the neck and the lip of the pot. The same tools were used again to shape anew, the same hands working in different directions. Robyn moves among us, gently bringing our awareness to our bodies as they work on the pots, the clay traveling with her, on her hands from the pots she is also calling from the clay.

While the pots rest, Robyn moves us to the medicine room where we continue with the Alexander work. I discover that I stand on my heels, essentially leaning back from the world. I recognize that place emotionally but am surprised on its physical echoing in my body. I am also surprised at my habit of not fully sitting, becoming aware as we work at how I hold myself up and later, in bed that night, aware of holding my self up even there.



*Robyn Avalon with
Russell and Ann*

Saturday becomes a strange day for me. Felipe leads us again in ceremony and prayer. We begin to work. My bean pot has a 'pookie' line crack, at the place where the mold ('pookie') for the base and the clay I had coiled and shaped meet. I hadn't supported the clay enough with my little finger, at that junction, in the shaping process. Felipe tells me it marks the place where we first left home and entered school. I had either not wanted to go to school or I had been eager to learn and had been disappointed in school. I know he is right and am intrigued.

It is time to water scrape the pots I have made, the stage where a certain amount of reshaping can take place. 'This is the process of making the pots human', Felipe tells us. 'just like we are made human.' I smear the red oxide stained wash on the outside of the pots and using the metal semicircle, I scrape away some of the bumps of my beginner's work. The red oxide infuses the air with a strong iron smell, which seems not pleasant. I am aware that I am afraid. I feel I might do damage, scrape too much or maybe too little. I might not get the balance right. I might drop the pots, I feel like hiding. Felipe comes and scrapes the outside of one of my pots with vigor. I feel his confidence, his knowledge of the clay and am aware even more intensely of this part of me that is afraid, that wants to leave, that wants to hide. But she is not all of me and as I work on the pots I talk to her, asking her not to go, telling her it will be ok, asking for her support. I need all my resources today.

At lunch Felipe, sitting opposite me, asks have I not any children yet? And there it is, the pain. So close to the surface it is as if Saoirse only died yesterday, sharp, intense, wanting to spill out. I feel the sympathy of the group as I tell of his death but also the need to pour out this grief, still here, still hot and sharp after four years, the grief for his death and the grief that no one else has chosen to come into our lives. It feels too hard, too much for this place, this table and I am shocked at the intensity, glad when the conversation moves on, yet filled with pain.

Returning to the pots, I feel the anger, the tears brimming behind my eyes, the sense of imminent collapse. Please not now, I plead with she-who-is-Saoirse's-mother, trying to find that balance between remaining and collapsing, without rejecting the grief and without being over whelmed. What is happening today I wonder. The fear and the grief. Was I always so afraid? Or is it Saoirse's death that has literally set me back on my heels, away from the world, in retreat, hiding at River Spirit for the last four years? I see myself like a clay pot wall, stretched too thin, about to collapse. I remember the person I was before I came here to New Mexico. What happened to the woman who used to dance, teach, helped found a Rape Crisis Center, was involved in her community, her women's group, who was out there in the world, somewhat adventurous? But then I see I was always afraid and this outgoing person was really a veneer, like a pot that is essentially flawed but covered with a nice outer coating, that eventually cracks in the firing or when used. My bean pot was later to echo this image back to me.

My phrase for the day was "Felipe, what about this crack?", as if all I could see were the faults, the prospect of failure. This pot won't make it. Felipe would shrug. It can be repaired. This is the only clay that can be repaired. This is the only clay that mimics life. My lesson to learn. A mantra to remember.

The tears escaped occasionally as Robyn worked on my jaw or as I sat outside sanding. Eventually the clay and the rhythm of the sanding process opened a space, enough for me to feel ok, to breathe again. Felipe was hosting a sweat lodge that night and I'm not sure about staying for it. Lynette, with whom I was traveling, does not want to stay. I check with my Old Woman who reminds me that there will be other opportunities if I chose to go home and so I leave, still feeling like running, crying, hiding.

I make space for the tears at home and for the first time I truly don't collapse in to that space of fury and rage and grief for even the shortest length of time. I cry and support myself and don't get lost. I know it is time to let go.

On Sunday, I return to the studio, feeling good, eager and ready to work again. The pots are waiting for the finishing to begin. I coat the outside with a slurry of clay and water, smoothing over the sandstone scratches, first outside, letting it dry, then inside. I sand it once more with sandpaper, evening out the surface.

Felipe shows us how to apply the slip coat. The slip is infused with Mica which give the characteristic sparkle to these pots. Three layers, then buff. Another layer, buff, use a stone to adhere the slip. A coating of oil, more buffing and polishing with a stone. Then drying and a shorter process of applying slip to the inside.



Felipe Ortega Places the pots in his Adobe kiln

My pots are finished, all drying out on the range but the bean pot keeps calling me back. I take it up again. I know it needs something, something more from me but I don't know what. I polish it again with the stone, running my hands over it, feeling that something is wrong, that it needs more but more what? I replace it on the stove and a while later, take it again running my hands over and over it. It needs something but I am puzzled as to what, unable to say 'I know this pot needs something. Please help,' out loud. I replace it on the stove. Afterwards I realize that I never even asked the pot itself what is needed.

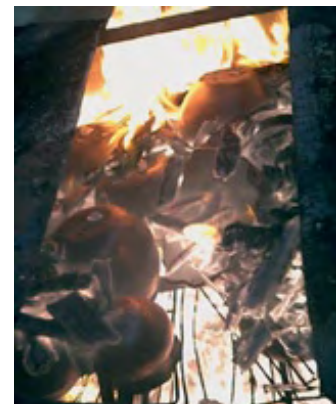
The fire is built outside in Felipe's kiln. The pots are placed on the rack and in stages Felipe heats them, adding wood carefully and incrementally. The pots turn black. The base from my corn bowl explodes, removing a layer of clay. I am surprised that it is not the bean pot. Felipe removes it from the fire. We see the signs of an air bubble. It can be repaired he says and he spreads more clay over it and returns it to the fire. The lesson again echoes through my mind. It can be repaired, healed, fixed. This is the only clay that mimics life.



The fire heats the pots and when he judges them to have reached the correct temperature, Felipe, with help from Russell, Mark and Robyn, covers the pots with wood and the firing truly begins. Flames rise. Another 2 explosions! The base of one of Russell's bean pots has also exploded but it is still fine for cooking with, he discovers with relief. The pots glow red with heat. The kiln top is opened and the flames dance around the pots. They vitrify. Their own color turns to a darkened version of the slip. Felipe leads us again in prayer, sprinkling cornmeal to the fire.

As the flames begin to die down, Felipe begins to remove the pots. We have the opportunity of decorating the pots with horsehair or leaving them in traditional style. My drinking bowl and my corn bowl both want horsehair. My bean pot and my rain drop bowl do not. In the minute they are removed from the fire, still glowing from the heat, the horsehair is dropped on the surfaces and it sizzles and forms patterns. We leave the pots to cool and Felipe has promised to read a pot for each of us later.

The final meal is a celebration. We are joined by friends of Felipe. Spanish and English words mingle and later a few words of Russian. Felipe is a wonderful cook. We had not only learnt to make pots this weekend but also home made corn tortillas! (Those of you who think I am a good cook, well, Felipe is even better!)



When the time comes to read the pots, I am not sure which one to offer. I ask the pots. The bean pot and raindrop bowl both say no. The corn bowl says a tentative yes and the drinking bowl a strong yes. I sit with both 'yeses' for a while. The Old Woman shrugs when I ask her and I realize that either will tell what I need to hear. The drinking bowl is read. A difficult birth, yes, protection from the ancestors, a roadrunner to tell of my power. I have worked through stuff this weekend and find a clarity in the moment. It is true. I feel clear, present, at ease. Felipe picks up the corn bowl too. The base exploded because of your birth and early life but see, it has been healed, he says. The words roll inside me. I know it is true.

We gather, hug, say goodbye. I carry my pots home happy.

I wake in the morning, longing to touch the clay again. I cry tears of relief. Something has shifted. I feel the blessings of the weekend, the people, the pots, the laughter, Robyn's teachings, the gift of Felipe's outrageous humor peppered with wisdom and above all the clay.



It seems to me that the clay has taught me about forgiveness. This is the clay that mimics life. If so, life can also be repaired, healed. This has been the most difficult lesson for me to learn, this reality the most difficult to trust, imbibe, allow inside. The Animals have shown me this place many times but I have been stubborn!. The clay has allowed me to experience it, to bring it home.

I place my bean pot on the stove to cook with and discover it has a crack. The 'pookie' line repair has not held. I apologize to the pot. I didn't ask for help for it. 'I am as I am' it says. It is ok. The lessons continue. It will remind me that there is more to learn and heal ... and other pots to make. I place the bean pot on my altar.

I am grateful for all I received, for the company of Ann, Mark, Russell, Lynette, for the opportunity of learning from Felipe and Robyn. Thank you, Robyn, for the gift. Gracias!

Robyn Avalon gives trainings and workshops in the Alexander Method in Europe, Japan and USA with the Alexander Alliance. She can be contacted at AASW, PO Box 124, Coyote, NM 87012, Telephone: 505-670-2596; alexandersw@earthlink.net. This summer, in Santa Fe, she offers a workshop on weaving and Alexander work combined.

Felipe Ortega gives workshops in Switzerland, Mexico and the USA. The contact for his Swiss workshops is Heidi Richener, 13 Schmitten Straße, Rogwil, CH 4914; Telephone: 41-62-929-1948. Felipe can be reached at po Box 682, La Madera, NM 87539; japacheraven@netscape.net.

Thank you, Mark and Russell, for the photographs!